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Plain packaging for tobacco: what other countries can learn from the UK's experience

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Bans on tobacco advertising, promotion, sponsorship and open display in shops in the UK encouraged tobacco companies to make “the pack the hero”. So they opposed plain packaging and claimed there was no evidence it would reduce smoking. They also attempted to thwart the policy through lobbying and third-party interference, and unsubstantiated claims about the effect on price, businesses and illicit trade.

Following a review of the potential public health benefits, the government introduced a policy that made plain packaging mandatory for cigarettes and rolling tobacco sold in the UK. The policy was first introduced in May 2016 and, after a transition period, became compulsory in May 2017. But research has shown that tobacco companies appeared to delay introducing plain packs, continued to explore ways to promote products and did not follow through with their predictions that prices would decline.

Stalled start

The UK was the third country to introduce plain packaging. The government gave tobacco companies and retailers a year to sell off fully branded stock before plain packaging became compulsory. This transition was longer than the two months allowed in Australia and seven-and-a-half months in France.

Our research shows that tobacco companies delayed the withdrawal of fully branded packaging and stalled introducing plain packaging. Many products did not appear in plain packaging until halfway through the transition year and, even when they filtered through, it was not until March 2017 – two months before plain packaging became compulsory – that retailers sold more products in plain packaging than in fully branded packaging.

Authors



Nathan Critchlow

Researcher, Institute for Social Marketing,
University of Stirling



Danielle Mitchell

PhD Student, University of Stirling

Attractive packaging increases the appeal of tobacco products, including for young people. Tobacco companies appeared to take advantage of the longer transition period to extend the presence of fully branded packaging as a marketing tool. The staggered introduction of plain packaging in the UK may have also gradually desensitised consumers to the new designs.

Concerns of falling prices unfounded

Tobacco companies were adamant that plain packaging would make price the only way that brands could compete, leading to lower prices, greater affordability, and higher smoking rates, thus defeating the purpose of the policy.

Yet early evidence suggests that concerns of falling prices are unfounded. Over the 12-month transition period, and for six months after plain packaging was compulsory, the price of leading cigarettes increased by almost 5%, equal to an extra £0.38 per 20 cigarettes. And the price of hand-rolling tobacco increased by almost 8%, equal to an extra £0.91 per 30 grams.

These rises are partly influenced by the prices at which retailers choose to sell tobacco. But when tracing back up the supply chain, the recommended retail prices for tobacco products were also found to have increased. This suggests that tobacco companies instigated these price rises. That prices were also reported to have increased above inflation and tax duty in the same period suggests that tobacco companies did little to protect affordability as plain packs were introduced.

Similar price rises were reported in Australia after plain packaging was introduced. This implies that suggestions of falling costs and rising affordability were intended to deter plain packaging, although long-term monitoring is needed to see whether the rise in prices and reductions in affordability are maintained.

Keeping product appeal

Tobacco companies respond to so-called “dark markets”, where most tobacco marketing opportunities are restricted, by concentrating their focus on remaining promotion opportunities. Our research suggests that this also happened for plain packaging, with tobacco companies exploring gaps in the policy and developing ways to keep their products appealing.

Before plain packs became compulsory in the UK, tobacco companies introduced limited editions of fully branded packaging. Limited edition packaging can increase sales, introduce a collector's mentality and have a lasting effect on brand perception once sold out. All leading tobacco companies also introduced fully branded reusable tins, providing a long-term alternative to plain packs.

Tobacco companies also introduced features to maintain product appeal, even when sold in plain packaging, such as resealable inner foil to preserve freshness and innovative filters. This included a filter containing two capsules that could be squeezed to change the cigarette flavour to mint or spearmint. Such innovation is important given that use and appeal of capsule cigarettes is greater in younger smokers.

Even once plain packaging became compulsory, tobacco companies sought to tweak pack designs to create a marketing edge. This included packaging with bevelled edges, which the law allows, and slim packs, which do not appear to meet the minimum size needed for health information on the side of packs. Both developments are important, given that tobacco company documents suggest that these new packaging designs are appealing to young adults and may lead to increased sales.



Plain packaged cigarettes with a slim pack design (left) and bevelled edges (right). Author provided

The number of countries introducing plain packaging continues to grow, so it is important to raise awareness of tactics that may undermine the policy and encourage other governments to take steps to limit any disruption. Shortening the time to implement plain packs, greater transparency and monitoring pricing strategies, and standardising all aspects of the pack design are important first steps.

Plain packaging Smoking Cigarettes Big tobacco

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